

# About Punjabi Language

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# THE PUNJABI LANGUAGE\*

*By*

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Punjabi is the oldest and one of the richest of the Indo-Aryan languages. Yet it has not developed to its fullest and is not so extensively used for writing purposes as some other regional languages of the country.

In this article, I have tried to analyse those factors which have been responsible for the hinderence of its development, and also those which have helped its growth. Lastly, I have tried to remove certain doubts and misgivings which are still lurking in the minds of the people—both the Hindus and the Sikhs—about this language and its script, so that it may be accepted by every Punjabi as his Mother-tongue.

During the Pre-Aryan age the people who lived in this part of the country, had a fairly high standard of civilization especially in the urban areas as has been discovered from the excavations carried out in many places.

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These people had, of course, their own language and a script. As far as their language is concerned, it has practically disappeared except for a few words which found their way in the Vedas and those which are still used by the people living in the hills in the remotest corner of the Punjab. As far as the script is concerned, it is a pity that in spite of great efforts, it has not been possible to decipher it successfully.

Our great fore-fathers, the Aryans, migrated from Central Asia and entered this country through the North-Western Passes of India between 5000 and 3000 B.C. in waves and at different times. They were enamoured of the beauty of the landscape, fertility of the land and easy availability and abundance of water from the rivers. They settled here permanently and contributed richly towards its social and economic development with the result that this land became the home of peace and plenty.

It is natural that when a community is free from want, its thoughts fly to discover higher values of life. Exactly this thing happened here and this land produced great thinkers,

sages and rishis who wrote the Vedas and this land can proudly be called the cradle of the Vedic philosophy and civilization.

It was then that the people of this land were really rich in the true sense of the word, i.e. having both the spiritual and material wealth in abundance. This land became the spiritual fountain which provided moral and spiritual values to all the people of the country. For many centuries we enjoyed this prosperity. But after some time our neighbouring countries began to see us with greedy eyes and started disturbing our peace by invading this country.

From then onwards, all that happened affected the language and culture of the Punjab in a number of ways. I would classify them broadly into four heads :—

- (1) External Factors
- (2) Internal Factors
- (3) Religious Factors
- (4) Political Factors

### 1. External Factors

North-western part of the country, as given earlier, was the gateway of India and the Western

people like the Greeks, Persians, Mangols and the Pathans entered the Punjab through North-western Passes as invaders. Some of them chose to go back after loot and plunder, while others settled down and ruled for varying periods. Their contact and stay made considerable impressions on the culture and language of this country.

Later on the Moghuls also came as invaders but they chose to settle down and rule over this country. Their long stay had a great influence on the culture and language not only of the Punjab, but, more or less, of the whole of India.

Last of all came the British as traders and stayed here to rule. Their stay for about a century in the Punjab had a great impact on the way of living and the language of the people.

From the above it is clear that the people of the Punjab from time immemorial had to face the invaders and had to mix with those who chose to stay or who could not be pushed back. This contact had a great influence on the regional language as well as the script.

## **2. Internal Factors**

The word PUNJAB was coined by the

Muslim invaders meaning thereby the land of Five Rivers. It was the translation of the older word "PANJNAD". It was not, however, a compact political unit and was composed of various regions which were called Subas. During the Moghul rule, the Subas of Lahore, Multan, Peshawar and Jammu & Kashmir had their own importance on the northern side and the Sarkars of Sunam, Samana and Ghruam had their importance on the southern side. During the time of Akbar, Sirhind also came in to importance.

It was only during the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh that this part of the country became one single political and geographical unit under the name of the Punjab.

Even after this, changes in the boundaries of Punjab continued to occur. The first change came when, after the Mutiny of 1857-58 the British, for Political reasons tagged on to the Punjab parts of the Delhi Division known as Haryana and Bhattiana.

Yet another change in the boundary of Punjab occurred when in 1947 the Punjab was divided into the East and West Punjab. What is known as the Punjab today is in reality a part

of Punjab which has come to our share after partition at the formation of the Pakistan and Haryana Regions.

These frequent changes of the boundaries of this State had great effect on the language and script of the State.

### **3. Religious Factors**

At the time of Shri Guru Nanak Dev, the Punjabi language was written in different scripts including Persian script. Out of the local scripts, "BAWAN AKHRI" (a script with 52 letters) "PATI" (a script of 35 letters) were more common. Out of these two, the PATI script was more popular among the masses. Therefore, Guru Nanak Dev adopted this script to bring out unification of various regions of the State.

Since Shri Guru Nanak Dev adopted this script, the Sikhs took this script as something very sacred and did not use it in their daily life. On the other hand, the Hindu brethren did not own it fully as they thought that this was something which belonged to the Sikhs alone. Could there be anything more unfortunate than this ?

To my mind the word "Gurmukhi" as under-



stood by the people is a misnomer. Literally the "Gurmukhi" means what has been said from the word mouth of the Guru and not the script that was adopted by Guru Nanak for writing of Punjabi language. If this word had been "GURLIKHI" probably it would have conveyed more appropriate meaning. If this misunderstanding had not occurred, things would have been different.

#### **4. Political Factors**

The Political factors had played a major role in hindering the development of Punjabi. During the time of early muslim rulers, the muslim writers used the persian script the only script they knew-for Punjabi language also. The Mughal rulers not only gave their fullest patronage to the Persian language and script, but also initiated Urdu which became predominant as a literary language in the Punjab-the home land of the Punjabees who actually spoke the Punjabi language.

After the departure of the Mughals, the British continued to give full protection to Urdu, because their clerks, imported from the provinces of Agra and Awadh, knew only Urdu, their native tongue. In addition to this, the

British introduced their own language, English, which soon became popular both in the offices and the educational institutions. Even today the educated people are more well versed in English and Urdu than in Hindi or Punjabi.

After Independance, Punjabi continued to be ill-treated by its own sons (Punjabees) on account of political reasons. As I have said earlier, the present Punjab State, is composed of nearly half of the old Punjab that came to our share after the partition, and Haryana region which was tagged to this State by the British after the Mutiny of 1857-58. The Mother-tongue of Punjabi region was Punjabi and that Haryana region was Bagri and thus this State became a bilingual State. So far it was right. However, a little later some Hindu brethern living in the Punjabi region exploited this bilinguilm for their political gains and declared Hindi instead of Punjabi to be their mother-tongue. By doing so, they completely forgot that a language did not belong to any religion or a religious group but to all the people living in the land. We all know that in Bengal, all Bengalis whether they are Hindus, Muslims, or Christians own Bengali as their mother-tongue. This is also true for all the other languages of the country.

Not only this, but in their anxiety to make the whole of Punjab bilingual State, these language-fanatics launched a campaign in the favour of Hindi with the result that a large number of Hindus living in the Punjabi region and speaking the Punjabi language day and night asked other Hindus, some of whom did not know a word of Hindi, to declare Hindi as their mother-tongue. The result was that in the Census of 1951 and 1961 a large number of Hindus wrongly declared Hindi as their mother-tongue.

This was such a glaring mischief that other section of the Punjabees who owned their mother-tongue resented this mal-practice. Riots broke out on this issue and the Union Government decided that the language column in the Census form may be left blank.

It is really very unfortunate that while Punjabi received unfair treatment at the hands of the foreign rulers, it did not receive any better treatment from her own sons.

### **Factors which helped the Development of Punjabi Language**

Now I relate briefly the factors which have

helped the development of Punjabi.

As I have stated earlier, Guru Nanak Dev adopted the Punjabi script from amongst those that were prevalent in this area. This script was popularized by Guru Angad Dev. Hereafter, all the Gurus adopted this script and Guru Granth Sahib was written in this Script.

For some time the people did not use this script for any other purpose because of the great reverence, which they showed to the Gurbani and thereby unknowingly hindered the progress of the wider use of this Script. It, however, soon in the time of the Gurus themselves came into vogue for other purposes as well, though to a limited extent.

In the time of Misaldar Sardars and Maharaja Ranjit Singh, this script made considerable progress in its non-religious use and a large number of classical works, story books and dramas were written in this script.

In 1873, an organization was formed at Amritsar under the leadership of Sardar Thakur Singh Sandhanwala. And, in course of time, this organization helped substantially in the development of Punjabi language by publishing

books, journals, newspapers etc. etc. and by adopting all other means aimed at popularizing this language amongst the people. Soon a large number of writers like Giani Ditt Singh, Gian Singh, Jawahar Singh, Gurmakh Singh, Vir Singh, Kahan Singh and others added to its literature.

A little later, the late Maharaja Bhupendra Singh of Patiala helped in the development of this language by issuing a circular that official work of a number of Government Departments would be carried on in Punjabi. Not only that, he ordered for the manufacture of Punjabi type-writers and placed an initial order for the supply of one hundred of such type-writers. This type-writer was named "Bhupendra type-writer".

A Punjabi Department was created to meet the administrative, educational, as well as general needs of the people in the sphere of change over from English to Punjabi at all levels. This Department was also to serve for creating guide lines and incentives for the development of Punjabi literature.

On the merger of the PEPSU and the PUNJAB, the Punjab Government also created

a Language Department as a sub-section of the Education Department, which is carrying on its work satisfactorily. It has to be admitted that official efforts had provided a strong foundation for the development of this language. Some of the important contribution of this Department are :—

The preparation of the first-ever standard dictionary of Punjabi language, compilation of the several small dictionaries of the various dialects of Punjabi, coining of over three thousand words relating to science and arts subjects, translation of a large number of English, Hindi, Marhatti, Bengali work into Punjabi and the compilation of an exhaustive encyclopedia in Punjabi language which is still in progress.

### **PUNJABI UNIVERSITY**

A further important step for the development of the Punjabi Language was taken when the Punjabi University was established at Patiala in April, 1962 to promote Punjabi studies, to provide for research in Punjabi, literature to undertake measures for the development of Punjabi language and to progressively adopt it as

a medium of instruction and examination for as many University subjects as possible.

This University has achieved a good amount of success in its work during this short span of period, and has got a number of projects and schemes in hand, all of which aim at the development of the Punjabi language.

To mention a few, this University started a postgraduate department of Punjabi in 1962. In addition to this, two specialised departments, one of Translation and other of Punjabi Historical Studies, were set up and they are functioning well.

The University has plans for about twenty different projects, all aiming at the development and popularisation of this language among the people. Some of them have been taken in hand and are making good progress. These projects include among other things, the publication of 13 popular books on science and seventeen monographs on heroes of the Punjab. It also contemplates on the evolution of heroic tradition in Punjabi in five volumes, Anthologies of the heroic poetry of the Punjab and also works on Punjabi bards.

For the benefit of those who do not know Punjabi, the Punjabi University is preparing a book in English, entitled "Teach your self Punjabi".

It is also preparing an epic on the life, philosophy and teaching of Guru Nanak and biographies of the three saints of the Ad-i-Granth and also contemplates to translate into Punjabi some of the selected war speeches of Winston Churchill and some other important Hindi and Urdu books on the history of Punjab.

It has approved of a project for the holding of a Punjabi Creative Writer's workshop during the summer vacation and also to hold a symposium every year in Punjabi on the contribution to World's literature of Nobel Prize Winners for literature.

### **Private Sector**

In the private sector, over two scores of Punjabi Literary Associations spread all over the State, both in the towns and rural areas, have made a substantial contribution to the development of Punjabi by publishing a large



number of literary works. The federation of all these Associations have planned to translate in Punjabi important books on Hindu religion and philosophy. Among these books are the Upanishads and the six Darshans.

### **Punjabi Speaking State**

The Government of India have agreed to carve out of the existing Punjab a Punjabi-Speaking State on the lines of linguistic States reorganized earlier.

From the above it appears that great steps have been taken for the development of the Punjabi language and now its growth in normal course is assured.

However, if we cast a look on the strikes, mob-violence, communal riots and vandalism that have occurred recently, and if these reflect the working of the minds of some of the people, then in spite of all the steps which have been taken, we cannot succeed either in the development of Punjabi language or in bringing harmony amongst the people of the Punjab. Therefore, the first problem that faces us is that we should sincerely try to preserve the well-established Hindu-Sikh Unity. Only then

the development of the Punjabi language and State will have any meaning.

Since there are lot of misunderstandings and fears in connection with this language, I would like to explain some of the points as best as I can, so that the real situation may be understood and evaluated.

### **Is Punjabi the Language of the Sikhs Alone ?**

The answer is an emphatic No. A language belongs to a region and not to any religion. Therefore, it does not look honest and truthful for any Hindu brother living in the Punjabi region to say that Punjabi is not his mother-tongue.

The Sikh religion came into existence only five hundreds years ago, while the people of Punjab and their language Punjabi have been in existence for thousands of years. It is the language of all the people living in the Punjab. To its literature, the Hindus and Muslim writers have contributed much more than the Sikhs. The most outstanding names of early writers in this language like Baba Farid, Bulle Shah, Warris Shah, Shah Hussain, Wali Ram, Kali Dass, Ishwar Chand, Kirpa Ram, Dhani Ram

Chatrik, Kishore Chand etc. were either Hindus or Muslims. The Sikh writers began to contribute their share to this language much later.

### **Is Punjabi the Language of the Illiterate and Village-Folk ?**

As mentioned above, Punjabi is the oldest and the richest of all the Indo-Aryan languages. It is the oldest because our ancient fore-fathers the Aryans, first settled down in the Punjab. It is the richest because its vocabulary has received, accepted and assimilated words from Greek, Persian and the languages of all those countries whose inhabitants came to this land through the ages as invaders, traders and settlers.

In 1930, an Enquiry Committee was formed by the Punjab University to adjudge the values of the Punjabi language. In its findings, it said emphatically that Punjabi is the oldest and the richest of all the Indo-Aryan languages.

### **Is Gurmukhi Script the Scriptural Script of the Sikhs**

The answer is again No for the following reasons :—

- (a) There are hundreds of religions in this World which have got their own holy books. But there is not a single religion which has got any special script which has been used exclusively for its holy books. Therefore the mere fact that the Guru Granth has also been written in Gurmukhi script does not make it a scriptural script.
- (b) In India every Linguistic State has got its language and its script. These scripts were evolved at some time by some great scholar of that region. To make it more clear, the Bengali script, the Tamil script etc. must have been evolved by the some great scholar belonging to some religion. But in spite of it, these scripts are accepted by all the people living in those regions irrespective of their religions.

It is true that Guru Nanak evolved the Punjabi script from amongst those which were prevalent in the country at that time. By doing so, he made a great contribution in bringing about the unification of those scripts and producing the one best suited to the word sounds of the Punjab. Simply because Guru Nanak happened

to be the first Guru of the Sikh religion, we cannot call it that the script evolved by him belonged to his followers alone and not to other residents of the Punjab.

Last of all, I may add that this script is not a foreign script. It is an off-spring of and gets its origin from Indian scripts and it belongs to all of us.

### **Why So much Importance is attached to the Script ?**

It is truly said that "kill the script and the language stands killed."

The development of this language remained hindered for hundreds of years because some of the Punjabies used the Persian script as also the Roman script.

It is true that some works in Punjabi have been written in Persian script also and it is equally true that if they had used the Punjabi script, the development of this language would have been far greater. But it must not be forgotten that the early Muslims were foreigners and they knew only the Persian script.

After Independence, the Government of India have accepted Hindi in Devnagri script to be the National Language. We have all gladly accepted it. If, however, Devnagri script is accepted for Punjabi also, then the chances of the development of Punjabi language would be as bad as when Persian script was used for it. It is, therefore, clear that the script is as important as the language itself.

### **The Solution**

The solution of the problem lies in that all section of the Punjabies shelve their fears and mistrusts and face the realities as they are. To my mind, a Punjabi who does not own Punjabi Language in Gurmukhi script is not a good Punjabi and a Punjabi who does not own Hindi in Devnagri script as the National Language is not a good Indian. So if we want to become good Punjabies, we should accept Punjabi as our mother-tongue and Hindi as our National language without any mental reservations. Here in lies the SALVATION OF us all.



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